

# Black Rock

By RALPH CONNOR

(Continued from First Page.)

Get them for me."

"Tomorrow will do. Go to sleep now, and we shall arrange everything to-morrow," I urged.

"No," he said fiercely, "tonight, now!" In half an hour they were listening, pale and grief-stricken, to the story of their father's death.

Poor Graeme was relentless in his self-condemnation as he told how, through his "cursed folly," old Nelson was killed. The three—Craig, Graeme and Nelson—had come as far as Victoria together. There they left Craig and came on to San Francisco. In an evil hour Graeme met a companion of other and evil days, and it was not long till the old fever came upon him.

In vain Nelson warned and pleaded. The reaction from the monotony and poverty of camp life to the excitement and luxury of the San Francisco gambling palaces swung Graeme quite off his feet, and all that Nelson could do was to follow from place to place and keep watch.

"And there he would sit," said Graeme in a hard, bitter voice, "waiting and watching often till the gray morning light, while my maddest held me fast to the table. One night—here he passed a moment, put his face in his hands and shuddered, but quickly he was master of himself again and went on in the same hard voice—"one night my partner and I were playing two men who had done us up before. I knew they were cheating, but could not detect them. Game after game they won till I was furious at my stupidity in not being able to catch them. Happening to glance at Nelson in the corner, I caught a meaningful look, and, looking again, he threw me a signal. I knew at once what the fraud was and next game charged the fellow with it. He gave me the lie. I struck his mouth, but before I could draw my gun his partner had me by the arms. What followed I hardly know. While I was struggling to get free I saw him reach for his weapon, but as he drew it Nelson sprang across the table and bore him down. When the row was over, three men lay on the floor. One was Nelson. He took the shot meant for me."

Again the story paused.

"And the man that shot him?"

I started at the intense fierceness in the voice and, looking upon the girl, saw her eyes blazing with a terrible light.

"He is dead," answered Graeme indifferently.

"You killed him?" she asked eagerly. Graeme looked at her curiously and answered slowly:

"I did not mean to. He came at me. I struck him harder than I knew. He never moved."

She drew a sigh of satisfaction and waited.

"I got him to a private ward, had the best doctor in the city and sent for Craig to Victoria. For three days we thought he would live—he was kept to get home—but by the time Craig came we had given up hope. Oh, but I was thankful to see Craig come in, and the joy in the old man's eyes was beautiful to see! There was no pain at last and no fear. He would not allow me to reproach myself, saying over and over, 'You would have done the same for me,' as I would, fast enough, 'and it is better to me than you. I am old and done. You will do much good yet for the boys.' And he kept looking at me till I could only promise to do my best."

"But I am glad I told him how much good he had done me during the last year, for he seemed to think that too good to be true, and when Craig told him how he had helped the boys in the camp and how Sandy and Baptiste and the Campbells would always be better men for his life among them, the old man's face actually shone as I light were coming through and with surprise and joy he kept on saying: 'Do you think so? Do you think so? Perhaps so, perhaps so.' At the last he talked of Christmas night at the camp. You were there, you remember. Craig had been looking a service, and something happened, I don't know what, but they both knew."

"I know," I said, and I saw again the picture of the old man under the pine, upon his knees in the snow, with his face turned up to the stars.

"Whatever it was, it was in his mind at the very last, and I can never forget his face as he turned it to Craig. One hears of such things. I had often, but had never put much faith in them. But joy, rapture, triumph—these are what grew in his face as he said, his breath coming short."

"You said—he wouldn't fall me—you were right—not once—not once—he stuck to me—I'm glad he told me—thank God—for you—you showed me—I'll see him—and tell him—And Craig, kneeling beside him so steady—I was behaving like a fool—smiled down through his streaming tears into the dim eyes so brightly lit that they could see no more. Thank him for that! He helped the old man through, and he helped me, too, that night, thank God!"

And Graeme's voice, hard till now, broke in a sob.

He had forgotten us and was back beside his passing friend, and all his self-control could not keep back the flowing tears.

"It was his life for mine," he said hoarsely.

The brother and sister were quietly weeping, but spoke no word, though I knew Graeme was waiting for them.

I took up the word and told of what I had known of Nelson and his influence upon the men of Black Rock. They listened eagerly enough, but still without speaking. There seemed nothing to say till I suggested to Graeme that he must get some rest. Then the girl turned to him and, impulsively putting out her hand, said:

"Oh, it is all so sad, but how can we

ever thank you?"

"Thank me?" gasped Graeme. "Can you forgive me? I brought him to his death!"

"No, no! You must not say so!" she answered hurriedly. "You would have done the same for him."

"God knows I would," said Graeme earnestly, "and God bless you for your words!"

And I was thankful to see the tears start in his dry, burning eyes.

We carried him to the old home in the country, that he might lie by the side of the wife he had loved and wronged. A few friends met us at the wayside station and followed in sad procession along the country road that wound past farms and through woods and at last up to the ascent where the quiet old woods church, black with the rain and snows of many years, stood among its silent graves. The little graveyard sloped gently toward the setting sun, and from it one could see, far on every side, the fields of grain and meadowland that wandered off over softly undulating hills to meet the maple woods at the horizon, dark, green and cool. Here and there, large farmhouses, with great barns standing near, looked out from clustering orchards.

Up the grass grown walk and through the crowding mounds, over which waves smelt the long, tangling grass, we bear our friend and let him gently down into the kindly bosom of Mother Earth, dark, moist and warm. The sound of a distant cowbell mingles with the voice of the last prayer; the clouds drop heavily with heart-startling echo; the mound is heaped and shaped by kindly friends, starting with one another the task; the long, rough beds are laid over and padded into place; the old minister takes farewell in a few words of gentle sympathy; the brother and sister, with lingering looks at the two graves side by side, the old and the new, step into the farmer's carriage and drive away; the sexton locks the gate and goes home, and we are left outside alone.

Then we went back and stood by Nelson's grave.

After a long silence Graeme spoke.

"Conner, he did not grudge his life to me, and I think," and here the words came slowly, "I understand now what that means. Who loved me and gave himself for me?"

Then, taking off his hat, he said reverently:

"By God's help, Nelson's life shall not end, but shall go on. Yes, old man, looking down upon the grave, 'I'm with you,' and, lifting up his face to the calm sky, 'God help me to be true!'"

Then he turned and walked briskly away, as one might who had pressing business or as soldiers march from a comrade's grave to a merry tune, not that they have forgotten, but they have still to fight.

And this was the way old man Nelson came home.

## CHAPTER XIV. GRAEME'S NEW BIRTH.

HERE was more left in that grave than old man Nelson's dead body. It seemed to me that Graeme left part at least of his old self there, with his dead friend and comrade in the quiet country churchyard. I waited long for the old careless, reckless spirit to appear, but he was never the same again. The change was unmistakable, but hard to define. He seemed to have resolved his life into a definite purpose. He was hardly so comfortable a fellow to be with; he made me feel even more lazy and useless than was my wont.

His first days were spent in making right, or as nearly right as he could, the break that drove him to the west. He old friend—and I have had more respect for the humanity of lawyers ever since—behaved really well. They proved the restoration of their confidence in his integrity and ability by offering him a place in the firm, which, however, he would not accept. Then, when he felt clean, as he said, he posted off home, taking me with him. During the railway journey of four hours he hardly spoke, but when we had left the town behind and had fairly got upon the country road that led toward the home he came to me in a great glow. His spirit was full of joy. He was like a boy returning from his first college term. His very face wore the boy's open, innocent, earnest look that used to attract me to him in his first college year. His delight in the fields and woods, in the sweet country air and the sunlight, was without bound. How often had we driven this road together in the old days!

Every turn was familiar. The swamp where the tamaracs stood straight and slim out of their beds of moss; the brake, as we used to call it, where the pine stumps, huge and blackened, were half hidden by the new growth of poplars and soft maple; the big hill, where we used to get out and walk when the roads were bad; the orchards, where the harvest apples were best and most accessible—all had their memories.

It was one of those perfect afternoons that so often come in the early Canadian summer before nature grows weary with the heat. The white gravel road was returned on either side with turf of living green, close cropped by the sheep that wandered in flocks along its whole length. Beyond the picturesque snake fences stretched the fields of springing grain, of varying shades of green, with here and there a dark brown patch, marking a turnip field or summer fallow, and far back were the woods of maple and beech and elm, with here and there the tufted top of a mighty pine, the lonely representative of a vanished race, standing clear above the humbler trees.

As we drove through the big swamp, where the yawning, haunted gulches plunges down to its gloomy depths, Graeme reminded me of that night when our horse saw something in that same gully and refused to go past, and I felt again, though it was broad daylight, something of the gressiveness that shivered down my back as I saw in the moonlight the gleam of a white thing not far through the pine trunks.

As we came nearer toward the houses

because familiar. Every house had its tale. We had eaten or slept in most of them; we had snipped apples and cherries and plums from their orchards, openly as guests or secretly as marauders, under cover of night—the more delightful way, I fear. Ah, happy days, with these innocent crimes and feeling remorse, how bravely we faced them, and how gayly we lived them, and how peacefully we look back at them now! The sun was just dipping into the treetops of the distant woods behind us as we came to the top of the last hill that overlooked the valley in which lay the village of Riverdale. Wooded hills stood about it on three sides, and where the hills faded out there lay the millpond sleeping and smiling in the sun. Through the village ran the white road, up past the old frame church and on to the white granite building among the trees. That was Graeme's home and mine, too, for I had never known another worthy of the name. We held up our team to look down over the valley, with its rampart of wooded hills, its shining pond and its nestling village. The beauty, the peace, the warm, loving homeliness of the scene, came about our hearts; but, being men, we could find no words.

"Let's go," cried Graeme, and down the hill we tore and rocked and swayed, to the amusements of the steady team, whose education from the earliest years had impressed upon their minds the criminality of attempting to do anything but walk carefully down a hill, at least for two-thirds of the way. Through the village, in a cloud of dust, we swept, catching a glimpse of a well known face here and there and flinging a salutation as we passed, leaving the owner of the face reeling in astonishment at the sight of Graeme whirling on in his old time, well known reckless manner. Only old Dunc McLeod was equal to the moment, for as Graeme lifted up, "Hello, Dunc!" the old man lifted up his hands and called back in an awed voice:

"Bless my soul! Is it yourself?"

"Stands his whisky well, poor old chap!" was Graeme's comment.

As we neared the church he pulled up his team, and we went quietly past the sleepers there, then again on the full run down the gentle slope, over the little brook and up to the gate. He had hardly got his team pulled up before, flinging me the lines, he was out over the wheel, for coming down the walk, with her hands lifted high, was a dainty little lady, with the face of an angel. In a moment Graeme had her in his arms. I heard the faint cry, "My boy, my boy!" and not down on the other side to attend to my off-horse, surprised to find my hands trembling and my eyes full of tears. Back upon the steps stood an old gentleman, with white hair and flowing beard, handsome, straight and stately. Graeme's father, waiting his turn.

"Welcome home, my lad!" was his greeting as he kissed his son, and the tremor of his voice and the sight of the two men kissing each other, like women, sent me again to my horse's head.

"There's Connor, mother!" shouted out Graeme, and the dainty little lady, in her black silk and white lace, came out to me quickly, with outstretched hands.

"You, too, are welcome home," she said and kissed me.

I stood with my hat off, saying something about being glad to come, but wishing that I could get away before I should make quite a fool of myself, for as I looked down upon that beautiful face, pale, except for a faint flush upon each faded cheek, and read the story of pain endured and conquered, and as I thought of all the long years of waiting and of vain hoping, I found my throat dry and sore, and the words would not come. But her quick sense made no words, and she came to my help.

"You will find Jack at the stable," she said, smiling. "He ought to have been here."

The stable? Why had I not thought of that before? Thankfully now my words came.

"Yes, certainly. I'll find him, Mrs. Graeme. I suppose he's as much of a scapegrace as ever." And off I went to look up Graeme's young brother, who had given every promise in the old days of developing into an stirring rascal as one could desire, but who, as I found out later, had not lived these years in his mother's home for nothing.

"Oh, Jack's a good boy," she answered, smiling again, as she turned toward the other two, now waiting for her upon the walk.

The week that followed was a happy one for us all, but for the mother it was full to the brim with joy. Her sweet face was full of content, and in her eyes rested a great peace. Our days were spent driving about among the hills or strolling through the maple woods or down into the tamarack swamp, where the pitcher plants and the swamp lilies and the marginals waved above the deep moss. In the evenings we sat under the trees on the lawn till the stars came out and the night dew drove us in. Like two lovers, Graeme and his mother would wander off together, leaving Jack and me to each other. Jack was reading for divinity and was really a fine, manly fellow, with all his brother's turn for Rugby, and I took to him amazingly, but after the day was over we would gather about the supper table, and the talk would be of all things under heaven—art, football, theology. The mother would lead in all. How quick she was, how bright her fancy, how subtle her intellect, and through all a gentle grace, very winning and beautiful to see!

Do what I would, Graeme would talk little of the mountains and his life there.

"My lion will not roar, Mrs. Graeme," I complained. "He simply will not."

"You should twist his tail," said Jack.

"That seems to be the difficulty, Jack," said his mother, "to get hold of his tail."

"Oh, mother," groaned Jack, "you never did such a thing before! How could you? Is it this baleful western influence?"

"I shall reform, Jack," she replied brightly.

"But, seriously, Graeme," I remonstrated, "you ought to tell your people of your life, that free, glorious life in the mountains."

"Free! Glorious! To some men perhaps," said Graeme and then fell into silence.

But I saw Graeme as a new man the

night he talked theology with his father. The old minister was a splendid Calvinist, of heroic type, and as he discoursed of God's sovereignty and election his face glowed and his voice rang out.

Graeme listened intently, now and then putting in a question, as one would a keen knife thrust into a foe, but the old man knew his ground and moved easily among his ideas, demolishing the enemy as he appeared with jaunty grace. In the full flow of his triumphant argument Graeme turned to him with sudden seriousness.

"Look here, father, I was born a Calvinist, and I can't see how any one with a level head can hold anything else than that the Almighty has some idea as to how he wants to run his universe, and he means to carry out his idea and is carrying it out. But what would you do in a case like this?"

Then he told the story of poor Billy Breen, his fight and his defeat.

"Would you preach election to that chap?"

The mother's eyes were shining with tears.

The old gentleman blew his nose like a trumpeter and then said gravely:

"No, my boy. You don't feed babes with meat. But what came to him?"

Then Graeme asked me to finish the tale. After I had finished the story of Billy's final triumph and of Craig's part in it they sat long silent till the minister, clearing his throat hard and blowing his nose more like a trumpeter than ever, said, with great emphasis:

"Thank God for such a man in such a place! I wish there were more of us like him."

"I should like to see you out there, sir," said Graeme admiringly. "You'd get them, but you wouldn't have time for election."

"Yes, yes," said his father warmly. "I should love to have a chance just to preach election to those poor lads. Would I were twenty years younger!"

"It is worth a man's life," said Graeme earnestly.

His younger brother turned his face eagerly toward the mother. For answer she slipped her hand into his and said softly, while her eyes shone like stars:

"Some day, Jack, perhaps, God knows."

But Jack only looked steadily at her, smiling a little and patting her hand.

"You'd chide there, mother," said Graeme, smiling upon her. "You'd better come with me."

She started and said faintly:

"With you? It was the first hint he had given of his purpose. 'You are going back?'"

"What—as a missionary?" said Jack.

"Not to preach, Jack—I'm not orthodox enough," looking at his father and shaking his head—"but to build railroads and lead a hand to some poor chap if I can."

"Could you not find work nearer home, my boy?" asked the father.

"There is plenty of both kinds near us here surely."

"Lots of work, but not mine, I fear," answered Graeme, keeping his eyes away from his mother's face. "A man must do his own work."

His voice was quiet and resolute, and, glancing at the beautiful face at the end of the table, I saw in the pale lips and yearning eyes that the mother was offering up her firstborn, that ancient sacrifice. But not all the agony of sacrifice could wring from her entreaty or complaint in the hearing of her sons. That was for other ears and for the silent hours of the night. And next morning, when she came down to meet us, her face was wan and weary, but it wore the peace of victory and a glory not of earth. Her greeting was full of dignity, sweet and gentle, but when she came to Graeme she flung over him and kissed him twice, and that was all that any of us ever saw of that sort of fight.

At the end of the week I took leave of them and last of all of the mother. She hesitated just a moment, then suddenly put her hands upon my shoulders and kissed me, saying softly:

"You are my friend. You will sometimes come to me?"

"Gladly, if I may," I hastened to answer, for the sweet, brave face was too much to bear, and till she left us for that world of which she was a part I kept my word, to my own great and lasting good.

When Graeme met me in the city at the end of the summer, he brought me her love and then burst forth:

"Connor, do you know, I have just discovered my mother. I have never known her till this summer."

"More fool I," I answered, for often had I, who had never known a mother, envied him his.

"Yes, that is true," he answered shortly, "but you cannot see until you have eyes."

Before he set out again for the west I gave him a supper, asking the men who had been with us in the old variety days. I was doubtful as to the wisdom of this and was persuaded only by Graeme's eager assent to my proposal.

"Certainly, let's have them," he said. "I shall be awfully glad to see them. Great stuff they were."

"But I don't know, Graeme. You see—well, hang it—you know—you're different, you know."

"I hope I can still stand a good supper, and if the boys can't stand me, why, I can't help it. I'll do anything but roar, and don't you begin to worry over my menagerie act. Now, you hear me?"

"Well, it is rather hard lines that when I have been talking up my lion for a year and then finally secure him he will not roar."

"Serves you right," he replied quite heartlessly. "But I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll feed! Don't you worry, he'll do something. 'The supper will go.'"

And so it did. The supper was of the best, the finest first class. I had asked Graeme about the wines.

"Do as you like, old man," was his answer. "It's your supper. But," he added, "are the men all straight?"

"I ran them over in my mind."

"Yes, I think so."

"If not, don't you help them down, and anyway you can't be too careful. Whole business from this out."

So I ventured wines, for the last time, as we were a quaint combination—old "Beetles," whose nickname was prophetic of his future fame as a bugman, as the fellows irreverently said; "Stumpy" Smith, a demon bowler; "Polly" Lindsay, slow as ever and as sure as

when he held the halfback line with Graeme and used to make my heart stand still at his cool deliberation. But he was never known to fumble or funk, and somehow he always got us out safe enough. Then there were Rattray—"Rat" for short—who, from a swell, had developed into a cynic with a sneer, awfully clever and a good enough fellow at heart; little "Wig" Martin, the sharpest quarter ever seen, and Barney Lundy, coarser scurrilous, whose terrific roar and rush had often struck terror to the enemy's heart and who was Graeme's slave. Such was the party.

As the supper went on my fears began to vanish, for if Graeme did not roar he did the next best thing—ate and talked quiet up to his old form. Now we played our matches over again, bitterly lamenting the "ifs" that had lost us the championships and wildly approving the tackles that had saved and the runs that had made the variety crowd go mad with delight and had won for us, and as their names came up in talk we learned how life had gone with those who had been our comrades of ten years ago. Some successes had lifted to high places, some failures had left upon the rocks, and a few lay in their graves.

But as the evening wore on I began to wish that I had left out the wines, for the men began to drop an occasional oath, though I had let them know during the summer that Graeme was not the man he had been. But Graeme smoked and talked and heeded not till Rattray swore by that name most sacred of all ever borne by man. Then Graeme opened upon him in a cool, slow way:

"What an awful fool a man is to damn things as you do, Rat! Things are not damned. It is men who are, and that is too bad to be talked much about. But when a man flings out of his foul mouth the name of Jesus Christ—here he lowered his voice—"it's a shame; it's more—a crime."

"There was a dead silence. Then Rattray replied:

"I suppose you're right enough. It is bad form. But crime is rather strong, I think."

"Not if you consider who it is," said Graeme, with emphasis.

"Oh, come now!" broke in Beetles. "Religion is all right. It is a good thing and, I believe, a necessary thing for the race. But no one takes seriously any longer the Christ myth."

"What about your mother, Beetles?" inquired Wig Martin.

Beetles consigned him to the pit and was silent, for his father was an Episcopal clergyman and his mother a saintly woman.

"I fooled with that for some time, Beetles, but it won't do. You can't build a religion that will take the devil out of a man on a myth. That won't do the trick. I don't want to argue about it, but I am quite convinced the myth theory is not reasonable, and, besides, it won't work."

"Will the other work?" asked Rattray, with a sneer.

"Sure," said Graeme. "I've seen it."

"Where?" challenged Rattray. "I haven't seen much of it."

"Yes, you have, Rattray; you know you have," said Wig again.

But Rattray ignored him.

"I'll tell you, boys," said Graeme. "I want you to know anyway why I believe what I do."

Then he told them the story of old man Nelson, from the old coast days, before I knew him, to the end. He told the story well. The stern fight

and the victory of the life and the self sacrifice and the pattern of the death appealed to those men, who loved faith and could understand sacrifices.

"That's why I believe in Jesus Christ, and that's why I think it a crime to fling his name about."

"I wish to heaven I could say that," said Beetles.

"Keep wishing hard enough, and it will come to you," said Graeme.

"Look here, old chap," said Rattray. "You're quite right about this. I'm willing to own up. What is correct, I know a few at least of that stamp, but most of those who go in for that sort of thing are not much account."

"For ten years, Rattray," said Graeme in a downright matter of fact way, "you and I have tried this sort of thing," tapping a bottle, "and we got out of it all there is to be got, paid well for it, too, and, though, you know it's not good enough, and the more you go in for it the more you cure yourself. So I have quit this, and I am going in for the other."

"What? Going in for preaching?"

"Not much—rattling, money in it—and lending a hand to fellows on the rocks."

"I say, don't you want a counter for your war?" said big Barney in his deep voice.

"Every man must play his game in his place, old chap. I'd like to see you tackle it, though, right well," said Graeme earnestly.

And so he did in the after years, and good tackling it was. But that is another story.

"But, I say, Graeme," perorated Beetles, "about this business—do you mean to say you go the whole thing—Jones, you know, and the rest of it?"

Graeme hesitated, then said:

"I haven't much of a creed, Beetles; don't really know how much I believe. Rat"—by this time he was stammering—"I do know that good is good, and bad is bad, and good and bad are not the same, and I know a man's a fool to follow the one and a wise way to follow the other, and," lowering his voice, "I believe God is at the back of a man who wants to get done with bad, I've tried all that folly, sweeping his hand over the glasses and bottles, and all that goes with it, and I've done with it."

"I'll go you that far," roared big Barney, following his old captain as of yore.

"Good man," said Graeme, striking hands with him.

"Put me down," said little Wig cheerfully.

Then I took up the word, for there rose before me the scene in the lounge saloon, and I saw the beautiful face with the deep, shining eyes, and I was speaking for her again. I told them of Craig and his fight for these men's lives. I told them, too, of how I had been too indolent to begin. "But," I said, "I am going this far from tonight. And I swept the bottles into the champagne tub."

"I say," said Polly Lindsay, coming up in his old style, slow but sure, "let's all go in, say, for five years."

And so we did. We didn't sign anything, but every man shook hands with Graeme.

And as I told Craig about this a year later, when he was on his way back from his old land trip to join Graeme in the mountains, he threw up his head in the old way and said: "It was well done. It must have been worth seeing. Old man Nelson's work is not done yet. Tell me again." And he